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Lid on Leaks

A White House crackdown

The President opened the Cabinet meeting by waving a newspaper dominated by speculative stories on his 1983 budget plans. The leaks must stop, he demanded. So once again a crackdown was ordered on an affliction that, particularly in times of trouble, seems to bedevil every Administration: the unending stream of information from inside the Government to the outside world. Although much of Ronald Reagan's wrath was directed at unauthorized speculation about his economic plans, the latest attempt to fasten loose lips was justified, as under previous Presidents, on grounds of national security.

The Administration had cause to be concerned about the seepage of national security secrets. In recent weeks, the *Wall Street Journal* has disclosed a private State Department memo discussing ways of putting pressure on the military regime in Poland, and the *Washington Post* has reported on a secret Pentagon study indicating that military costs over the next five years may be \$750 billion more than now projected. Furor about this latter leak prompted Deputy Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci and some associates to volunteer to take lie-detector tests to show they were not culpable. Even as the White House was considering new ways of dealing with the problem, word was beginning to leak about another sensitive matter: the Administration's decision to sell Taiwan F-5E fighter jets, rather than the more advanced model it had requested.

Thus it became one of William Clark's first jobs as National Security Adviser to draft statements for himself and the President warning Administration members of the consequences of discussing security information with reporters. According to a high White House aide, announcement of the guidelines had to be rushed because news of their existence was beginning to leak. The crux of the President's order: "All contacts with any element of the news media in which classified National Security Council matters or classified intelligence information are discussed will require the advance approval of a senior official. In the event of unauthorized disclosure of such informa-

tion, Government employees who have had access to that information will be subject to investigation to include the use of all legal methods." Since the bureaucracy is usually quite free in wielding the CLASSIFIED stamp, the rule could conceivably be used to restrict most discussions of policy.

Clark emphasized that the Administration was not blaming reporters. Said he: "The press has been doing its job, collecting information, better than the Government has been doing its job, protecting national security information." But the new steps reflect an underlying feeling within the Administration that the unwanted publication of unfavorable news, be it on foreign policy difficulties or budget disputes, is more injurious than the problem. When asked in November to relate his biggest disappointment in office, the President did not point to rising unemployment, burgeoning deficits or vexing foreign policy issues. His answer: "The inability to control the leaks." And he has blamed the press, rather than the officials involved, for the controversial foreign policy turf battles that have become public.

Although Reagan and his top advisers have been quite accessible to reporters, they have sought to keep close control on the disclosure of information by others. Chief of Staff James Baker has sent a memorandum to Cabinet departments formally reminding them that all television appearances and major press interviews must be cleared with the White House. Directives were also sent down within departments ordering that important contacts with journalists be approved in advance by superiors. The new guidelines will isolate journalists from the middle-echelon officials who are most knowledgeable about the details of policy.

The crackdown may stem, at least for a while, some disclosures that the Administration finds embarrassing or ill timed. But it is unlikely to plug the major leaks. Officials in the Reagan Administration, like those in power before them, use leaks to serve their own political and personal purposes. Many disclosures spring from upper-level officials who feel they can advance the Administration's interest by discreetly floating ideas as trial balloons or by publicizing policy plans. As the old Washington saying goes, the ship of state is unique—it leaks from the top. ■